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Editorial: In this issue: Foreign correspondents in Asia-Pacific

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Foreign Correspondents In Asia-Pacific

The allure of reporting the distant and the exotic has been long acknowledged. Even in Elizabethan times, Shakespeare had Othello enrapture Desdemona with what might be considered a form of foreign correspondence, spinning stories of his travels. In describing how he first enthralled her, he explains:

*I spake of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hair-breadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly breaches...
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven.
(Othello I, 3)*

The glamour and prestige attached to reporting from foreign climes persists in the modern-day news industry. Journalists hold "an almost blind conviction that a foreign posting is the pinnacle" of professional life, with such positions being the most sought-after in news organisations (Zuel 1999: 4). The status attached to foreign correspondence is acknowledged – whether directly or indirectly – by most of the articles in this issue. John Schauble's paper is perhaps the most explicit, quoting mid-20th century correspondent Garry Barker, who describes foreign correspondents as being "knighted in their profession".

John Tebbutt and I have edited this issue with the aim of looking beyond the immediate attractions of travel and adventure commonly associated with the foreign correspondent's work. The articles address subjects such as news organisations' procedures for selecting correspondents, the correspondents' training, the economic considerations that influence what they cover, how they frame the news and other related questions. This issue contains academic research articles, professional commentaries based on journalists' practical experience in the field and papers that

combine both scholarly technique and personal professional insights.

Schauble's article indicates that despite the highly coveted nature of correspondence positions, Australia's leading newspapers have no formal mechanisms or criteria for appointing foreign correspondents. He assesses that the situation has improved little in the decade since Julianne Schultz (1989: 42) noted that: "All too frequently an appointment to a foreign posting has been viewed as a reward within an organisation, or as a way of solving a problem at home." Postings are assigned more on the basis of editors' impulses and internal organisational politics, rather than a rational system of selecting journalists on the grounds of their training, language skills or understanding of the region.

Christopher Vaughan's article on US correspondents in the Philippines provides perspectives from the 19th and 20th centuries on how innovative reporters have worked around the frustrations of internal appointment systems by establishing themselves as stringers. The key to their success rests on recognising the primacy of the marketplace by standing out from other correspondents with exclusive reports that secure a distinct market niche. The paper also indicates that such a monopoly position may also lead to (potentially unethical) access to financial and political power.

Christopher Patterson and *Max Quanchi* also broach marketplace concerns. Patterson's ethnographic study of international television news agencies explores how the "holy accounting ritual" in editorial meetings, in which each story has to be justified to the last dollar, leads news agencies to eschew worthy but 'unsexy' issues-based stories. Instead they devote newsroom resources to stories that involve well-known personalities or that can be reduced to what Mort Rosenblum (1979) calls the "coups and earthquakes" syndrome – ie conflict-, disaster- or violence-driven narratives. Quanchi's paper similarly explores the effects of economics on content, demonstrating that Australian reporting of the Pacific neglects the key political, economic and cultural issues of the region. He concludes that reporting is "determined and limited by the nature of Australian media ownership, profit and programming".

Given the marketplace drive towards news about violent conflict, it is unsurprising that Al Goodman and John Pollack (1997: 133) note that: "In the popular imagination, foreign correspondence is often synonymous with war correspondence." War correspondents are consistently depicted in popular cinema and even their own autobiographies as "frenetic, occasionally insensate, yet ultimately heroic" lone rebels and rugged individualists who "ply their trade with near lunatic courage"

(Pedelty 1995: 29-30). Many correspondents, especially younger ones, are convinced that they are more likely to make a mark and further their careers if they cover the world's hot spots (Goodman and Pollack 1994: 138-140; Hess 1996: 18).

Peter Cole-Adam's paper demythologises the mystique of reporting on war, insurrections and revolutions, arguing that "able reporters are not paid to be heroes but to file copy". He explains in addition to avoiding threats of physical harm, war correspondents face daily problems in filtering endless streams of propaganda, in attempting to access both sides of the story and in meeting deadlines while the details of the story are still muddy. Such circumstances do not just contribute to personal risk; they create clear obstacles to comprehensive and accurate reportage.

Cole-Adams stresses that the probability of producing shallow, ill-informed or dogmatic reportage is greatest during the inexperienced correspondent's first days in unfamiliar territory. He argues that this is because editors like their correspondents to "hit the ground running", filing reports before they have gathered the appropriate background. Cole-Adam's assessment correlates with the findings of my research on foreign correspondents in Indonesia (Romano 1996) which indicated that they had been expected to start reporting from their first days in Indonesia, even though most arrived with rudimentary or no language skills and only a basic understanding of socio-political conditions. The demand for correspondents to promptly produce stories upon arrival in a country is connected again with market principles, because correspondents who generate substantive bills for their news organisations must justify their presence (Dorney 1989: 34).

At a second level, there is also a presumption that journalistic skills are transferable (Pollock 1981:66). It is perceived that foreign correspondents – usually seasoned journalists – should be able to apply their well-honed reporting skills in all environments, even geographically and culturally unfamiliar ones. While some of the interviewed correspondents objected to the presumption that they should land in Jakarta and, in the words of one, "immediately start churning out stories", others suggested that it was appropriate. Agence France-Presse (AFP) bureau chief Bernard Estrade, for example, said:

In my office, I am probably the one who knows the least about Indonesia. But I am also, I hope, the one who probably knows the most about journalism. I know best about what is interesting, what we should do and what kind of things we should pursue. (pers. comm., August 1995)

Preparation For Postings

Looking Through Foreign Glasses

Of the 22 correspondents I interviewed – including 16 journalists from Australia, one from New Zealand, two from the US, two from the UK and one from France – only two had been supported by their news organisations with language and other training prior to taking up their appointment. All other correspondents who had studied the language had done so at their own initiative, in their own time and at their own expense.

Stephen Hess's survey of 774 foreign correspondents found that language training is increasing, with an average of 25 weeks of advance training before overseas postings. This has contributed to relatively high language proficiency levels. Of those respondents actively working as foreign correspondents when Hess's survey was conducted in 1992, 67 per cent were fluent enough to conduct interviews in foreign languages (Hess 1996: 81). Hess's figures also show, however, extremely high levels of language proficiency for correspondents posted in European and Latin American countries in contrast with low levels for those in Asian countries (Hess 1996: 83).

Alan Knight's (1995: 11) study of Australian journalists in Southeast Asia similarly found low levels of language proficiency, with only six out of the 16 correspondents he surveyed (ie 37.5 per cent) claiming fluency in an Asian language. Six could only speak English (37.5 per cent), while the remaining four (25 per cent) spoke other European languages in addition to English.

Western correspondents who "hit the ground running" with little advance preparation or language training are generally forced by practical considerations to depend on a limited range of culturally accessible sources. One American correspondent I interviewed – who requested to remain anonymous – disparagingly noted that many of her colleagues over-relied on sources from multinational businesses and foreign embassies where "you get your tablespoon of political analysis" (pers. comm., August 1995). While such an approach tends to reinforce the correspondents' Western frames for perceiving and evaluating news, it has advantages in that the information is easily accessible and pre-digested for its significance to foreign audiences. Not surprisingly, Rodney Tiffen's 1970s study of Western correspondents in Southeast Asia concluded that the most notable aspect of their source structure was "the symbiotic relationship between journalists and diplomats" (1978: 61). Knight's 1990s study of Australian correspondents similarly found the intense reliance on embassy and foreign affairs officials had not diminished, with diplomats remaining the journalists' most

favoured sources in East and Southeast Asia (1995: 11).

The propensity for Western correspondents to view the Asia-Pacific through foreign glasses is intensified because foreign journalists tend to cluster together, working in offices in the same complexes or close geographic proximity. (See, for example, Romano 2000: 51.) While there is still competition between these journalists, almost all the foreign correspondents I interviewed admitted that they collaborated far more in Indonesia than in their home countries. One Reuters journalist noted that fraternity between foreign correspondents was more intense because: "You're talking about a very small community who are operating in an environment that sometimes appears hostile to them or at least impenetrable, opaque." While the foreign correspondents argued that their informal alliance supported fledgling correspondents during their first weeks and months in a country, they also admitted that seasoned correspondents continued to share intelligence and to crosscheck information with each other for its meaning and significance on an ongoing basis. This networking between correspondents again has the potential to reinforce the observation and reportage of news through Western frames.

Poor understanding of different communications cultures also emerged as a common problem. Before the end of Soeharto's¹ New Order government in 1998, Indonesia's senior public figures were rarely subject to cross-examination by the media. The local media tended to portray political and military leaders in ways that suggested stability and unity, rather than as defending themselves against antagonists (Berry et al. 1995: 18; Fisher and Leigh 1988: 21). The forthright and bold behaviour of some foreign correspondents may have been perceived by some as a "remnant of colonialism" (Berry et al. 1995: 15), causing offence or arousing hostility. Former Indonesian editor Nono Makarim (1978: 262), for example, says his compatriots were sometimes aghast at "the [foreign correspondents'] lack of tact and aggressiveness in their straight, inconsiderate ways of 'information grabbing'" during interviews and press conferences. Indonesia's communications culture has shifted since the collapse of the New Order, with a consequent increase in robust interviewing and reporting of political father figures (Romano 2000: 68-69), but the behaviour of Australian foreign correspondents in the region was often blamed for strains in relations between the two countries during the years of Soeharto's presidency. (See, for example, Byrnes 1994; Fisher and Leigh 1988, Jenkins 1986, Kingsbury 1994 and Tiffen 2000.)

The Jakarta-based correspondents I interviewed were all long-term correspondents – all based in Indonesia for assignments of one to seven years. Only one correspondent, AFP's Estrade,

might have been considered an exception, because at the time of interviewing he had only been in the country for three months. Reporters on such long-term assignments cannot be regarded as typical of all correspondents, especially given the trend in recent decades for news organisations to reduce the numbers of foreign correspondents in their stables (Goodman and Pollack 1997: xix-xx; Greider 1992: 303). The papers by both Schauble and Patterson in this issue point to the increasing proclivity for news organisations to lower their costs by reducing numbers of correspondents. They satisfy their needs for international news by sharing correspondents and operating expenses with other, affiliated news organisations and/or by using more news agency reports, supplemented by the occasional trips of 'visiting firemen' or 'parachute reporters'. 'Visiting firemen' are correspondents based in centres such as Hong Kong or Singapore, who may be obliged to cover as many as 20 Asia-Pacific countries. Or they may be reporters located in the main office in Sydney or even further afield, who only visit the Asia-Pacific for crises and major events.

Yet again, marketplace realities are behind the reduction in numbers of permanent postings. The annual cost of running a full-time bureau with one correspondent is estimated at A\$200,000 to \$300,000 for print organisations and at \$300,000 to more than a \$1 million for broadcast operations (Michael Byrnes, pers. comm., August 1995; Goodman and Pollack 1997: xix-xx; Hachten 1996: 124; Ian MacIntosh, pers. comm., September 1995). On top of establishment costs, news organisations' ongoing expenses include a senior journalist's salary, housing, office rental, computers and other equipment, travel costs, health care, education allowances for the journalist's children and so on. Most organisations are reluctant to spend such money on establishing bureaus in the Asia-Pacific. Even though Australia is located on the south of the globe, "there persists at the highest level within many Australian news organisations the view that on a day-to-day level what happens in London, New York, Hollywood, even Paris is more important – or at least more interesting to the news consumer – than what is going on next door" (Schauble 1996: 8).

There are major drawbacks in relying on the occasional trips of 'visiting firemen' to cover regional crises or major events. 'Firemen' are only sent to cover key public figures, events or issues, with little potential for reportage of anything but the most blood-soaked, dramatic or extreme of news and current affairs. Hess (1996: 4) notes that reporting the world with "parachutists" is "an economical system of news gathering and one guaranteed to make the world appear even more dangerous than it is". While foreign correspondents in long-term postings gradually develop source

networks outside Westernised circles and move closer to the communications style of the society they report on (Romano 1996), the 'firemen' are unlikely to spend sufficient time in any one country to surmount language barriers, unfamiliarity with cultural nuances and other problems. These obstacles might be overcome if editors adopted a strategy of sending the same 'firemen' to a particular region over a period of time. However, given the inclination of editors to send "the man or woman closest to the door" to cover news in smaller countries like Papua New Guinea (Dorney 1989: 34), these correspondents are most likely to arrive with no background, little time to research and limited or non-existent source networks. An entertaining albeit dated example of editorial attitudes is revealed by the experience of CBS journalist Bob Stout when he was requested to move immediately from Saigon to Sydney. When Stout asked his executive producer if he understood the distance between the two cities, the producer replied: "It's an inch and a half on my map" (Auletta 1991: 273).

The limitations of foreign correspondency in the Asia-Pacific has drawn fire from many countries in the region, which have long complained that Western journalists display little empathy or sensitivity for local cultures and customs. (See, for example, Berry et al. 1995; Broinowski 1982; Horton 1978; MacBride et al. 1980; Schiller 1976). They accuse foreign correspondents of superficial and sensationalist reporting, which creates a distorted depiction of a region racked by unremitting coups, crises, corruption and chaos. In Australia alone, multitudinous seminars, panels, conference papers, books and journal articles have focused on the faults of the country's journalists when they report on their nearest northern neighbours. The simplistic and demeaning reportage that correspondents produce does not only stem from the inappropriate frameworks and world views of reporters. Editors in the home office are also more interested in their correspondents sending stories that feature the 'hometown angle', sex shops and disasters than complex regional political, economic and social issues (Nagle 1989: 12). In the words of one Indonesian news executive, it is as if "they saw their own faces reflected from afar, ugly and deformed" (Szende 1989: 38).

If journalists in countries like Australia might be criticised for focussing obsessively on news from the US and Europe rather than their neighbours, then it should be noted that many countries in the region do not show any greater standards of excellence in reporting on Australian life. For example, my research on Indonesia in 1997 found that only six reporters – three full-time correspondents and three stringers – reported from Australia for the Indonesian population of almost 200 million people. This compared with 12 reporters who covered Indonesia for Australia's

Improving Global Information Flows

population of approximately 18 million. A 1997 content analysis of two months of coverage of two Indonesian daily newspapers which have correspondents in Australia – *Kompas* and *The Jakarta Post* – found the absence of news about Australia more conspicuous than its presence. Much of the Australian news that was published came from selective culling of news agency services and was similarly coloured by a focus on crisis or trivia, following three main themes. One was political instability, with stories about the then controversial independent Federal MP Pauline Hanson, race issues, indigenous issues, immigration and, occasionally, unemployment. The second was a 'cutesy' category, including photographs of fireworks over the opera house on New Year's eve and stories about koalas. The third were sports stories. Without the many internationally significant sports events that are hosted in Australia, such as the Australian Tennis Open, the country would have rarely rated a mention.

The problem of stereotypical reportage, therefore, is not purely one of the Western correspondents versus the others. Western nations have the advantage in global information flows in that they control the leading news agencies and conglomerates, which market their products to the perceived interests of Western audiences. The volume of stories for global consumption put out by the big agencies' reporters about Western countries as seen through Western eyes far outweigh those from the Asia-Pacific as seen through Asian and Pacific eyes. However, correspondents – regardless of where they come from – are liable to rely on a narrow and inappropriate repertoire of stereotypes when relocated to a new operating environment. The nature of attempts to rectify these problems have been twofold. Firstly, there have been efforts to counterbalance the dominance of commercially driven Western agencies by establishing and supporting alternative providers of news. Secondly, there have been bids to target journalists as individual professionals, improving their knowledge and skills.

To consider the first element, one of the major initiatives in addressing the information imbalance and providing news that expresses the voices of developing nations has been the establishment of alternative news exchange mechanisms (NEMs) (Boyd-Barrett and Thussu 1992: 7-31; Samarajiwa 1984: 119; Smith 1980: 105). These involve agreements for systematic news exchange, often along cooperative lines, between Third World news media organisations. NEMs that have operated within the Asia-Pacific region include Inter Press Service; the agency for development, economic and population news, DEPTHnews; the

Pacific Islands news association, PINA; the Pacific radio news exchange, PACNEWS; the television news exchange, Asiavision; and the ASEAN wire-service exchange, ANEX.² A new alliance of Asian newspapers was also established in March 1999 with the aid of the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation. The Asian News Network (ANN) was born with the aim of improving the regional news coverage of eight newspapers in seven countries – Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and India – by sharing same-day news. Within months of its foundation, ANN had invited newspapers from Cambodia, China, Japan, Korea and Pakistan to join the alliance after receiving several inquiries for new membership (ANN 1999).

In regards to the second element, many countries have attempted to enhance the performance of foreign correspondents through education and exchange programs. In Australia, for example, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade funds selected journalists to attend in-country intensive language courses in Asia. It further runs short-term 'visit programs' that enable journalists to conduct research and extend their understanding of regional socio-political dynamics. Other initiatives have been sponsored by the union-cum-professional association, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, and various academic institutions. One of the most recent initiatives is Melbourne University's newly launched Medialink. *Sue Downie's* paper discusses how Medialink aims to facilitate regional contacts for news organisations, organise short-term placements for journalism students and lecturers and create opportunities for Australian and Asian media professionals to spend three to 12 months working in-country with local news organisations (Medialink 1999). Individual news organisations have also arranged cross-country exchanges between staff, with the arrangements between Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* newspaper and Semarang's *Suara Merdeka* newspaper being current examples.

Julianne Schultz (1989: 43-46, 48-49) has identified problems in developing a journalism curriculum that has relevance to students and the industry. As Schauble's paper notes, more than a decade after Schultz made her observations, these problems are yet to be resolved. In their paper, *Nicole d'Entremont* and *Elizabeth Dougall* argue that traditional learning environments are inherently unsuited to the nature of foreign correspondents' work. After exploring how computer-mediated communication might be used to develop correspondents' knowledge, skills and competencies, the authors propose a rudimentary new model for a foreign correspondents' Internet learning network. *Belinda Weaver* and *Stephen Quinn* also provide details of existing Internet resources of interest to foreign correspondents and scholars of for-

Covering Crises

eign correspondency.

Errol Hodge's paper provides one warning note. While supporting the principle that foreign correspondents require thorough training in their host country's language, history and culture, Hodge also proposes that too much education may result in journalists who over-identify with those countries, affecting their professional objectivity.

Finally, the journalists assigned to cover the 'coups and earthquakes' are themselves human, and the endeavour to report stories of extreme misery can exact a toll on both reporters and those they report on. This issue contains four papers from *Toil and Trouble*, a colloquium conducted to pose questions about how journalists deal with reporting traumatic events. Journalists – in common with law-enforcement officers, firefighters, medical personnel and other professionals who encounter emergency situations in their work – are vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress. Psychologist Martin Cohen says that journalists who cover a tragedy can be "injected with a poison – a certain kind of energy that can affect you for a long time if you don't deal with it" (Steele n.d.).

In his paper, *Sean Dorney* relives his experiences in covering the 1998 tsunami that killed more than 2000 people in Papua New Guinea – a story for which he won Australia's most prestigious journalism award – revealing the secondary trauma he suffered in reporting such a crisis. *Richard Lower* details the dilemmas he faced as an editor, obliged to keep sending his journalists to the scene of the 1996 Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania that claimed 35 lives, even as they manifested increasing symptoms of strain and distress. *Philip Castle* details the effects on journalists of covering traumatic incidents, suggesting a system of counselling or debriefing for news workers who are exposed to tragedy. *Trina McLellan* explores how media coverage of traumatic events impacts on the victims, their families, their friends and their communities. She follows with simple and practical recommendations on how journalists can avoid intensifying the grief of those affected by tragic incidents. While the latter three papers do not directly address issues of foreign correspondency, their analysis of the Port Arthur massacre is of relevance to all foreign correspondents. The influx of journalists from around the globe, many of whom manifested the worst elements of journalistic behaviour, was in part a contributing factor to the trauma undergone by the residents of the usually quiet and placid region.

In reporting on crises and disasters, journalists have the potential on the one hand to assist both the victims and the

audiences who are touched by news of their suffering or on the other to inflict even greater pain on those who are already at their most vulnerable. The continuous recycling of media images can particularly impact upon those with post-traumatic stress disorders, who may suffer flashbacks and repetitious recounting of the traumatic incident in a manner somewhat akin to that depicted centuries ago by Shakespeare's guilt-stricken character, Lady Macbeth. It seems fitting to end this article as it began, quoting Shakespeare, who in Macbeth poses a question of relevance to today's correspondents, whether foreign or local:

*Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart? (Macbeth V, 3)*

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NOTES

- 1 The spelling of the former Indonesian president's name conforms to that in *Apa dan Siapa: Sejumlah Orang Indonesia 1985-1986* (published by Tempo in 1986, Jakarta), the Indonesian equivalent of Who's Who.
- 2 For details on Inter Press, see Dixit (1994) and Galtung and Vincent (1994), for DEPTHnews see Ali (1978), for PINA see Ratulele (1999), and for PACNEWS, Asiavision and ANEX see Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992: 40-41).

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